

The Philosophy of Need: Round 3

E.P. Brandon

Appeals to need have not in general found much favour in philosophical thought, although they are attractive to commonsense. Despite well-known examples like Marx's "From each according to his ability; to each according to his need" philosophers have tended to avoid invoking need when they consider issues of social justice, and in less prestigious areas of philosophy such as that devoted to educational issues, the typical position has been that educationalists do not illuminate their problems by talking about needs (cf. the entry for needs in Winch and Gingell, 1999). On the other hand, non-philosophers have no compunction about appealing to the idea of need: in development economics, in critiques of consumer society, or in agreeing on principles of social justice,¹ among many others.

On a couple of earlier occasions ([‘O reason not the need’](#), 1980, and [‘Is ‘A needs X’ elliptical?’](#), 1993) I tried to give an account of ‘need’ and ‘needs’ that explains this reluctance among philosophers. This third engagement with the topic is prompted by a recent book, *The Philosophy of Need*, edited by Soran Reader, that is based on a conference at which advocates of needs tried to take things further. I shall try to isolate what is at issue between the contributors to the book and those who are sceptical of the invocation of need, and to reflect on what the disagreement shows about the, or at least a, philosophical stance.

One way to characterise the difference between the friends of need and those who have urged caution about its use is by reference to the question that I used for my second piece: is the claim ‘A needs X’ elliptical? Or rather, since no one doubts that on some occasions of use such claims definitely are elliptical, is that sort of claim *always* elliptical?

What do we mean by talking of ellipsis here? Basically, the idea is that the sentence I focussed on leaves out a crucial element that must be restored somehow if anyone is to give it a determinate meaning. An apparently simple example is a sentence like ‘A is to the left of B’, which requires that we adopt a particular perspective or frame of reference before we can consider whether it is true or false. In the case of ‘A needs X’ we have to supply some Y for which, or to achieve which, A needs X. I need to buy a light-bulb holder; why? To fix a table lamp that is not working properly.²

¹ Gillian Brock (in the Reader volume, pp. 58-62) reports work by Frohlich and Oppenheimer which strongly suggests that actual people favour a “floor constraint” principle over things like Rawls’ Difference Principle or Harsanyi’s utilitarian principle of maximising average incomes. The floor constraint ensures that no one falls below some minimum level of income so that their basic needs are met.

² For much more on the history and utility of the notion of ellipsis in philosophising, see my [‘Ellipsis: history and prospects’](#), *Informal Logic*, 8, 93-103 (1986). The account of the implicit logic of ‘need’ that I am using derives from A.R. White’s *Modal Thinking*, Blackwell, 1975.

Ellipsis of this sort is very common. It does not in general render a way of talking useless or mystifying. We get along pretty well talking of left and right without noticing most of the time that we have to keep adopting a particular stance. It might become noticeable if we are giving someone directions over the phone: if you've just passed Carlton Supermarket on your left, then take the second road on the right – but if we imagine the person as having passed the supermarket on their right then we have to reconsider our instructions. So ellipsis is not in itself debilitating. But arguably there are contexts in which certain bits of language let us get away with serious indeterminacies because of these ellipses. In such cases I have suggested that we often don't know what is actually being claimed; we may go along with the words used, because we assume that we can give them an expansion that would satisfy us, but it may not be what the other users are thinking of, if indeed they, or we, are thinking of anything specific.³ These uses, if they do exist, do seem to me to be in need of philosophical doctoring.

It would be hard to deny elliptical uses of '*A* needs *X*'. I need to buy a bulb-holder. If we take the claim to be true it is because I need it to fix my table lamp, not because I need it to cook the dinner or write this paper or any number of other things which I am also concurrently aiming at. Such elliptical uses of our sentence are often and for an obvious reason labelled 'instrumental'. The *X* is usually a means to the *Y* in question that is typically elided.⁴

Now with means-ends one can always iterate the topic. *X* is a means to *Y*; what is *Y* a means to? But there are many contexts in which people are inclined to think that, rather than being open to endless iteration, this type of question must come to an end. I need *X* to fix a table lamp; I need to fix the table lamp to have a light in a particular place at least expense; I need to keep expenses down so as to keep my family in the style to which they have become accustomed; I need to do that to keep them happy. And here, or not long after, people are inclined to think that there is no room for further iterations. When you are impressed with the fact that it seems pointless to ask what some *X*s are needed for, because they are obviously a matter of preserving *A* in being or keeping *A* out of serious harm, then you may say that there is another sense of 'need' or another use of our original sentence⁵ form which is not elliptical. As Wiggins has put it, "although there is an instrumental sense of 'need' where we can ask for some purpose to be specified in a non-elliptical version of the 'needs' claim and there are no limits on what purpose this is (except the limits of what can be of any conceivable concern to anyone), there is another sense of 'need' by which the purpose is already fixed, and fixed in virtue of the meaning of the word" (1998 [originally 1985], 9). Wiggins glosses this 'absolute' sense along

³ I have elaborated on these notions in my '[Ellipsis and Ideology](#)', 1987.

⁴ To say 'the *Y* is perhaps too strong. Various *Y*s might be specifiable that would count as functionally equivalent. While being careful, it is also worth noting that I said '*a* means' – there may well be other means besides *X* to achieving *Y*. As it happened, an electrician fixed the lamp by gluing up the crack in it. And again, the relation may not always be a matter of means-end.

⁵ This is an alternative suggested by Thomson's remarks in Reader's collection, at page 177.

these lines: “A cannot get on without X, his life will be blighted without it, or some such thing.”

As I understand it, Wiggins is claiming, to adapt one of my examples in the direction of one of his, that we might agree that Mary needs \$200 to buy a dress but also consider that Mary doesn't need to buy a dress and so doesn't need the \$200 for that purpose. We can also agree that Mary doesn't need \$200 to buy today's paper. But in saying Mary doesn't need \$200 when we have that purpose in mind we are apparently doing something very different from thinking Mary doesn't need \$200 full stop. In the absolute sense, he says “What distinguishes the second sense of 'need', so defined by reference to the first, is that it is in virtue of what is carried along by this sense itself of the word 'need', not in virtue of context (whatever part context plays in determining that this is the sense intended), that appeal is made to the necessary conditions of harm's being avoided. If so, the identity of the antecedent of the conditional ‘Necessarily, since circumstances are what they are, if. . . ., then ___’ [this is the bare bones of Wiggins' construal of our basic sentence form] is fixed by the presence of the word ‘need’ taken in this absolute sense. It must follow that there is then no question of ellipse in this case. (One does not have to supply again what is already there.)”

Wiggins is aware of the difficulties in deciding on how many senses a word may possess – indeed he has a whole paper (1971) on the issue. And on occasion he says, what I would want to say too, that rather than find *a priori* guidelines that dictate an answer, the answer should rather flow from our best overall explanatory theory of the language: “The correctness of §§3-7 and of the use they make of such ideas as harm and necessity chiefly depends on whether the proposals put forward there make better sense of the data than any rival semantical hypothesis.”

Now my preferred account of the data is briefly that we should operate at all times with the elliptical construal, adding to it the idea that when no more specific *Ys* can be guessed at and are not explicitly offered then we have to go to ‘default’ *Ys* relating to survival or the avoidance of harm as the only fillers we could be expected to invoke from our general knowledge. As I wrote in 1993, “Why does not-specifying point us in the direction of ‘fundamental needs’? Simply because not specifying lets us assume that the audience can supply the *Y* off their own bat, without knowing anything special about *A*; *A*'s adventitious purposes would not be thus available, so all we can fall back on are matters related to persistence as *A*.” One thing I would also say is that rather than moving to a comparatively precise notion like the one incorporated in Wiggins' absolute sense, speakers seem to me to move more into indefiniteness. Wiggins says that some of the examples he quotes show that people are in effect saying we would be seriously harmed if we don't have more motorways or more nuclear power-plants. Now it seems to me those people cannot seriously be thinking that we can't go on at all without these things; rather we can't go on pretty much the way we have been doing. ‘Business as usual’ requires these extras, but not our sheer survival. And no one gets very far in specifying business as usual.

I might also remark that there are many other cases where sequences of “why?” questions seem to come to an end. Though the examples I give are not elliptical expressions, we find that though we want X because it gives us Y , and we want Y because it provides Z , we soon run out of answers; we just want certain things; or like them. We can of course distinguish fundamental wants or likings from derived or dependent ones, but no one, I think, would want to erect a distinction of sense or usage on such a foundation. Of course, in these cases we do not get the phenomenon of assenting to and simultaneously denying the same sentence form (A needs X but really A doesn’t need X), but that, it seems to me, is a symptom of ellipsis, not of a distinction in sense.

The question that now seems to me worth asking – given everyone’s acknowledgement of the variety of needs, the relativity to social context even of Wiggins’ vital needs (he quotes Adam Smith’s elegant formulation: “By necessities I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people even of the lowest rank to be without” (*Wealth of Nations*, V 2, 2.)) and the contentiousness of many of the claims made in these contexts – is what hangs upon the answer to our original question? Why does it matter whether ‘need’ has two senses or uses or just one? Does it indeed matter at all?

It seems to me that part of the point of Wiggins’ insistence on his separate absolute sense arises from the rhetorical or strategic use he wants to make of it, by challenging on its basis the truth of many of the everyday claims of need put forward by public planners. As I said above, it is hardly plausible to think that we simply could not go on without a few flyovers, to take a local variant of Wiggins’ own concerns about motorways and their destruction of small communities. If you can get people to evaluate the truth of such claims by reference to Wiggins’ absolute needs you may well get them to reject them. But it is clearly possible for the advocates of flyovers to specify their claim in such a way that while it is not our sheer survival that is at stake it remains something important for our flourishing. And I suggest that such an implicit filling of the Y slot was what they most probably had in mind anyway.

I have nothing at all against Wiggins’ encouragement to all parties to take a more imaginative view of the possibilities. With regard to the view that motorways are needed to provide access to supermarkets and such like, he says “the right name for the standing, invariable need (the need that underlies the shorter term need) is not ‘mobility’ but, more plastically and indefinitely, ‘access [to facilities that are frequently needed]’” (p. 22, fn.) and so might be seen as suggesting alternative distributions of such facilities (no one needs to travel to amazon.com or anywhere else to get its merchandise, at least if its postage charges were not so exorbitant). The advocacy and investigation of such possibilities is desirable, but it does not seem to me to require any commitment to absolute needs. It is a matter of the more careful exploration and specification of the various X s and Y s and their ramifications that I think the elliptical treatment is intended to invite.

Specification rather than leaving things unspoken is the motivation behind my advocacy of the elliptical story. It is of a piece with criticisms of the appeal to ‘potentialities’ or ‘capabilities’ or ‘aptitudes’ as things schools, say, will cultivate. In all such cases, we are taken to assume a serious selection has been made among all the potentialities or aptitudes that might in fact exist. We have potentialities to become addicts or criminals as well as accountants or cricketers, but headmasters telling us about developing potential will not be thinking of such things. But then what are they thinking of? Their schools do not offer very much on the surface to cater to the vast range even of socially acceptable and accepted potentials. Their words are, I fear, mainly hot air, empty of any determinate content. The elision of the *Y* slot in talk of needs makes it very easy to go on in like manner. We can feel assured that there are some *Ys* that will make our claim true, but we are not forced to specify them.

It is perhaps curious that Wiggins, like me, found useful thoughts in *King Lear*. He remarks: “The poignancy of the contrast between the thin set of universal needs that *nature* will underwrite and the set of things that may be needed by someone placed in a particular situation is brought out, however obliquely to Shakespeare’s intention, most vividly in *Lear* (2.4.262):

Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's.

Plainly, there is no ‘human need’ to have a retinue of a hundred knights. But an abdicated king in *Lear*’s position needed such a retinue -- and, to judge by what happened to him, much else besides.” And he also notes “the bureaucratic consciousness construes ‘vital interests’ extremely narrowly, so narrowly sometimes as to include little more than the bare prerequisites of life.” It was the ease with which the *Y* slot can be reduced to mere exiguous survival with a few “do you *really* need that?” that led me to urge that it would be better, more fruitful for policy, always to try to specify the *Ys*. And notice that the bureaucratic negativism he mentions is basically the same sort of move as I was claiming Wiggins himself wishes to make versus the road-planners and enthusiasts for nuclear energy. Wiggins does not want to take the *Y* in the absolute case as narrowly as the bureaucrats, but he does want to take it as “the” absolute *Y* rather than as a more variable one, varying with perhaps each invocation of a need. In both cases the aim is to construe the claim so it is false. I suggest it would be more fruitful to try to uncover a *Y* for which the claim is interestingly true, and then turn to the real issue of whether that *Y* is worth the cost, whether it should take priority over the myriad other aims we have, etc.

What I find myself saying is that in these and similar cases what people are saying is seriously incomplete and indeterminate, and that progress might come from being more precise. But I have to admit that people go on using language like this and that my calls for specificity tend to go unheeded. These games are played, it might be said. And isn’t that enough? It isn’t as if I didn’t understand the people, couldn’t see how to go on with the dialogue. Wiggins himself reports on his early days in the Colonial Office: “everyone knew in practice what need meant, knew a need from a mere desire, and knew a vital need from a need that was less than that” (in *Reader*, p. 26). I have a fair idea of what potentialities are being included and which ones are being excluded when headmasters

talk of what their schools aim to foster. But when one is not altogether satisfied with the status quo, when one thinks that different things might more profitably be aimed at, then it isn't really enough just to play along with the standard elisions. There begins to be a point in saying "well really what you are on about is this, and yet you might consider that too." And Wiggins reports the way he was moved to fight for the importance of needs by the crass effects of cost-benefit analyses in the case of motorway planning around London in the late '60s, the "total transformation of the lives of a significant class of people (present and future) whose vital interests are to be sacrificed to the end of creating large quantities of some less important supposed benefit for a supposedly much larger ... class of people" (p. 28).

Wiggins at one point invokes Aristotle on why political debates cannot be too precise, on the "inherent indefiniteness of the subject matter of practice" as Wiggins expresses it. It is Aristotle's account of equity as a matter of adjusting the universal and broad claims of the law to fit the particular circumstances that were not and could not have been envisaged by the law-maker. The complexity of the particular situations we have to deal with cannot be denied. But how does it connect with the analysis of 'need' statements? One way might be because specifying the actual *Y* for which *X* is truly needed is often virtually beyond us. Wiggins' avoidance of harm or whatever can stand in place of the reality we cannot fully describe. We are much better able to specify the *X*. When the *Y* we want is not easily specifiable it is easy to take the derivative *X* simply as another, derivative want, derivative however from an unspecified end. And it is at least possible to consider whether we should want the *X*; when we cannot even specify it we cannot do much with the question whether we should want *Y*. But it still seems to me that to take it as Wiggins' absolute *Y* is to up the stakes unnecessarily, to invite the deflationary move towards bureaucratic meanness.

Rhetorical force, or differences among popular concepts in their rhetorical force, is a topic that arises several times in Reader's volume. Alkire (p. 232) contrasts "this group is deprived of basic capabilities" versus "this group has unmet basic needs" – 'capability' lacks the normative force of 'need', as does any appeal to 'wants'. As many have noted, one of the attractions of needs-talk is that it is as robustly objective as one can desire. If I need *X*, I need *X*, whatever I may happen to think about it, whether I want to have *X* or not. But on the other hand some needs-claims do seem to be powerfully normative. I want to see this as derived from our usual commitments to the *Y*s involved in these particular cases. But, however that may be, it is agreed that some claims about need are especially forceful.

Other contributors, however, suggest that there are dangers lurking here: of paternalistic abuse of the objectivity involved (O'Neill) or the demeaning of the 'needy' as largely responsible for their own situation (an issue raised by O'Neill and Braybrooke). These worries can be met, as the respective authors show.

What I am coming to think is that the issue between Wiggins and my own account is not so much a question of semantic theory but, to put it in my terms, about the importance of the various *Y*s that are in play, or to put it in Wiggins' terms, on the acceptability and

applicability of his Limitation Principle (“it counts as *unjust* to sacrifice the truly vital needs of one citizen to the aim of meeting the mere desires of some larger number” p. 33). Or, to be more accurate, on the contestable questions about what exactly are a person’s vital needs. Dwelling on the notions of inescapability, of serious harm being ineluctably consequent on not getting the *X* in question, (I take these from Thompson’s summary of fundamental needs (Reader, pp. 176-177)) surely does lead one towards the bureaucrat’s minimalism, or to making inviolable particular ways of life that are not in fact as unchanging as their privileging via the Limitation Principle seems to suppose.

References

- Brandon, E.P. 1980. [O reason not the need](#). *Education for Development*, 6, 18-25.
- Brandon, E.P. 1986. [Ellipsis: history and prospects](#). *Informal Logic*, 8, 93-103.
- Brandon, E.P. 1987. [Ellipsis and ideology](#). In D.N. Perkins, J. Lochhead, and J.C. Bishop (Eds.), *Thinking: the Second International Conference*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Reader, S. (ed.) 2005. *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge University Press.
- White, A.R. 1975. *Modal Thinking*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wiggins, D. 1971. Sentence sense, word sense and difference of word sense. In D. Steinberg and D. Jacobovits (Eds.), *Semantics: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiggins, D. 1998. *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, 3rd edition. Oxford University Press.
- Winch, C. & Gingell, J.R. 1999. *Key Concepts in the Philosophy of Education*. Routledge.